

Manchester Best-Seller A Pain in the Bookshop

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William Manchester's account of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, "The Death of a President," which created a furor over its contents, is today creating a massive headache among booksellers and bookbuyers.

Depending upon the person interviewed, it is a "bomb," a "slow-mover" or "an eventual big success." Like many things connected with the story, no one seems to agree on it.

It has created a bitter feud among merchants. Some regular bookstores are holding the line on the \$10 retail price but discount houses, department stores and other outlets are unloading it at greatly reduced figures. One salesman for a clothing firm reported he had purchased it for \$4.99 in a Midwestern town.

The usual criteria for book sales are virtually useless in measuring the impact of the book. It is a best-seller without question, in that it is selling in the scores of thousands. Yet many bookstores report slow sales, with many copies left on the shelves and some are returning books to Harper & Row, the publishers, rather than take a loss.

NUMBER ONE SPOT

"The Death of a President" is in the number one spot on most lists. It is there in Book Week, the book review section of the World Journal Tribune, and in Publishers' Weekly, the "bible" of the book trade.

Yet sales are not running away, according to many in the industry.

"Before publication day," said one publisher who quite naturally wanted his name kept secret, "there was wide-spread betting as to what it would eventually sell. The estimates ran from 250,000 to 2,000,000. Now it seems the ones with the lower figures will win."

A LOSS-LEADER

Under arrangements set up by the publisher, sellers could sell as much as 45 per cent below the retail price if they bought enough copies—a figure never made public.

Large discount houses, like

E. J. Korvette and Caldor, which normally have a small book department specializing in juveniles, cartoon books, cookbooks and such titles, bought large quantities of the Kennedy book from the Cosmo Book Corp., a wholesaler.

They wanted the book, said a regular bookseller, as a "loss-leader" or a "traffic-mover." These terms are used for any item that lures people into a store.

Owners of small book stores, who rely on steady sales through the year, expressed bitterness over the way the Manchester volume has been distributed. They say they perform a quasi-public service by carrying books needed by students and others but that when a book like this one comes along the discount houses and department stores "skim the cream off the profit bottle."

Many of these booksellers use the word "bomb" or "disaster" when referring to their sales. They said Harper & Row set a 10 per cent limit on returns on the book, although as a rule any book unsold within a year can be sent back to a publisher.

This effort by Harper to hold

the line failed in the face of widespread fear by booksellers that they would be left holding the bag. Last week Harper rescinded its ultimatum, at least on all books ordered before March 31, the date for simultaneous release of the book.

BOOK OF MONTH OFFER

One of the complications that has beset the sale of the book is the fact that the Book of the Month Club is offering it for 33 1/3 cents in a deal where a new subscriber may get it and two other books for one dollar if he agrees to buy three other volumes during the following year.

Reasons for the relatively slow movement of the book—and the word "relatively" is important in this connection—are many and diverse. Many booksellers said that they thought the pre-publication serialization in Look magazine

had killed many hard cover sales.

Other reasons include the activity of New Orleans District attorney Jim Garrison and his many statements that there is still more evidence to be divulged, the stories printed by other magazines based on photographs which tend to show that Manchester did a poor reporting job in some instances, and a general surfeit with the subject.

ROUGH ON LBJ

"Manchester is rough on President Johnson, particularly at the time of the swearing-in ceremony," said a rival publisher. "But millions of people saw the ceremony on television and know that some of the things the author said are just not true. This made many potential buyers feel that if there were inaccuracies they could themselves spot there may be others."